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Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge

John Diggins passed away on January 28, 2009. The *New York Times* obituary is available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/30/arts/30diggins.html>. I regret that the usual publishing delays prevented Professor Diggins from being able to complete his response, which he had planned to write after his release from the hospital. Diggins' response would have been as challenging and thoughtful as the book under review and his next, unpublished one, on Reinhold Niebuhr. As an intellectual historian, Diggins crafted many books that explore the evolution of ideas from across the political spectrum and chronologically ranging from John Adams to Lincoln and to Reagan.

John Diggins' explorations challenged the historiography on his subjects and this holds true with his book on Reagan. Diggins, for example, pushes further away from contemporary and early liberal dismissals of Reagan as "sleep walking" in the White House as conservatives plotted to roll back the last remnants of New Deal-Great Society liberal reform and neoconservatives advanced schemes to roll back communism and win the Cold War. Several of the reviewers find persuasive insights in Diggins' intellectual assessment of Reagan and his thesis that emphasizes the influence of earlier liberal thinkers on Reagan, most notably Thomas Paine and Ralph Waldo Emerson, in shaping his general perspective.¹

Diggins' reassessment of Reagan has been reinforced by many works, including Sean Wilentz's Bancroft prize winning *The Rise of American Democracy*. In *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008* (2008), Wilentz suggests that his views on Reagan have changed over time and writes that he now considers Reagan the "preeminent political figure" of the second half of the 20th century and most influential in "redefining the politics of his era and in reshaping the basic terms on which politics and government would be conducted long after he left office."² Similar to Diggins, Wilentz is more critical than conservative authors on Reagan's handling of some economic issues and on his Cold War interventionist policies under the Reagan Doctrine, especially in Central America and the Iran-Contra Affair. Both authors, however, rank Reagan as president on a very high level; Wilentz places Reagan among leaders such as Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, and Franklin Roosevelt, all of whom shaped not only their terms in office but also influenced their successors. Diggins goes even further, comparing Reagan favorably with Abraham Lincoln for his vision and contribution to ending the Cold War: "At the very moment of victory, Reagan displayed humility, as did Lincoln when the North emerged victorious in the Civil War. Both exceptional presidents were politically wise, humane, and magnanimous. Each had greatness of soul." (430)

Conservative reviewers are not sure what to think when academics such as Diggins and Wilentz write favorable assessments of Reagan. They would be less impressed by another

¹ See reviews by Kim Phillips-Fein, *Enterprise and Society*, Dec. 7, 2007; Katherine Ernst, "Was Reagan a Liberal?," *City Journal*, March 2, 2007; Robert Brent Toplin, "Blame Ronald Reagan For Our Current Economic Crisis," September 11, 2008, and "Ronald Reagan and the Day the Earth Stood Still," December 30, 2008, *The LA Progressive*.

² Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008* (New York, 2008), 3, 286.

recent study, *Deconstructing Reagan: Conservative Mythology and America's Fortieth President* (2007) which includes essays by Michael Schaller on "Reagan and the Cold War," John W. Sloan, "The Economic Costs of Reagan Mythology," Jerrey D. Mayer, "Reagan and Race: Prophet of Color Blindness, Baiter of the Backlash," and Kyle Longley, "When Character Was King? Ronald Reagan and the Issue of Ethics and Morality." Noting the proposal to put Ronald Reagan's face on Mount Rushmore, Longley suggests that the authors will examine "several cornerstones of the conservative mythology surrounding Reagan" and their conclusions on Reagan are more critical than those of either Diggins or Wilentz.³

Conservatives welcome the willingness of scholars to reexamine and reconsider their earlier negative views on Reagan, although they may be less open to reconsider their own assessments on Reagan. As Rich Lowry, editor of the *National Review*, emphasizes, Diggins offers a challenging assessment although Lowry rejects Diggins' effort to praise Reagan for moving to a policy of cooperation with the Soviet Union and away from his neoconservative advisers. "This is revisionism gone amok," Lowry complains, for "Reagan always thought he could save the world precisely by defeating the Soviets" by saying "no" when negotiating with Mikhail Gorbachev and keeping the Strategic Defense Initiative as a pressure point on the Soviets.⁴ Daniel McCarthy, a contributing editor to *The American Conservative*, finds Diggins more persuasive on Reagan's blending of Emersonian liberalism with 20th century conservatism, and so does the veteran conservative columnist George Will, who definitely prefers the conservatism of Edmund Burke and James Madison to Reagan's Thomas Paine. "Reaganism tells people comforting and flattering things that they want to hear," Will writes; "the Madisonian persuasion tells them sobering truths that they need to know."⁵

Jacob Heilbrunn, contributing editor of the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*, and author of *They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons* (2007), and Steven F. Hayward, a fellow at the Claremont Institute and the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think-tank in Washington, disagree more extensively with Diggins. In reference to Diggins' ranking of Reagan among the four greatest American presidents with Lincoln, George Washington, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, Hayward suggests that "Reaganistes may be tempted to spike the ball, do an end zone dance, and declare 'game over'." Hayward, however, says "hold it right there" when Diggins defines Reagan as the great liberal liberating spirit of the twentieth century. Reagan may be a classical 18th century liberal, Hayward admits, but he was definitely not a 20th liberal advocate of an "unconstitutional administrative state."⁶ Heilbrunn notes a split in the perspective on Reagan advanced by neoconservatives and traditional, realist conservatives with arguments pro and con on whether or not Reagan laid the groundwork for George W. Bush's interventionist campaign for democracy in the Middle East and another division over whether Bush abandoned Reagan's anti-big government campaign. "Reagan, an

³ Kyle Longley *et.al.*, *Deconstructing Reagan: Conservative Mythology and America's Fortieth President* (2007).

⁴ See Rich Lowry, "The Liberal Reagan," *New York Times*, Feb. 18, 2007.

⁵ George F. Will, "The Limits of Sunniness," *Washington Post*, Feb. 11, 2007.

⁶ Steven F. Hayward, "Reagan and the Historians," *Claremont Review of Books*, Nov. 5, 2007. Hayward's review also addresses several other recent books on Reagan as does Heilbrunn in his review.

amalgam of liberalism and conservatism, flouted conventional political categories, which explains why he has become a transcendent historical figure, beyond Left and Right,” concludes Heilbrunn.⁷

“Conservatives need to get over their Reagan fixation,” Heilbrunn suggests, for Reagan, “a product of the New Deal and the Cold War ... belongs to the past, not the future.” Our reviewers focus on Reagan in the past and raise a number of questions concerning Diggins’ assessment:

1) Diggins is most interested in the origins of Reagan’s political philosophy and devotes less attention to the implementation of his policies and his leadership skills as chief executive, either as Governor of California or President. Diggins reviews the influence of Reagan’s mother and her Disciples of Christ religion, the “Communist Controversy in Hollywood,” and Whitaker Chamber’s *Witness*, but his most original contribution is to emphasize the influence of the perspectives of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thomas Paine. Without being able to verify what Reagan actually read growing up or at Eureka College, Diggins’ resorts to noting similarities in ideas expressed by Reagan with Emerson and Paine. At the Republican National Convention in 1992 in his last public address, Reagan noted that “Emerson was right. We are the country of tomorrow. Our revolution did not end at Yorktown. More than two centuries later, America remains on a voyage of discovery, a land that has never become, but is always in the act of becoming.”⁸ The reviewers are not completely persuaded by Diggins’ emphasis on Emerson and Paine. John Sloan favorably cites Diggins’ description of the 1980s as “America’s ‘Emersonian moment,’ when people were told to trust not the state but the self and to pursue wealth and power without sin or shame. Far from being a conservative,” Diggins asserts, “Reagan was the great liberating spirit of modern American history, a political romantic impatient with the status quo.” (p. xvii) Sloan cautions that “few conservatives are likely to agree with Diggins’ argument that their hero ... was really a liberal,” but Sloan suggests that Reagan was more likely to advance Paine’s views than those of conservatives like Edmund Burke. (1) John Ehrman views Diggins’ thesis on Reagan as a product of his studies over three decades of American political culture and as based on John Locke’s individual rights philosophy, with conservatives abandoning Burkean ideas of tradition and authority for opportunity and prosperity through supply-side economics. Reagan advanced this transformation based on his own experience and integrated it with Emersonian themes. (1-3) Don Critchlow, however, suggests that Diggins “does not show Emerson as having any direct intellectual influence on Reagan” and suggests that Reagan probably disagreed as much with Emerson’s ideas as much as he agreed with them. (3)

2) A central question that has attracted most of Reagan’s biographers and Diggins is why Reagan moved from being a New Deal liberal to a leading conservative spokesman and politician in the 1960s. Diggins notes the many leftists, Marxists, Trotskyites, and liberals

⁷ Jacob Heilbrunn, “Books and Reviews: A Uniter, Not a Decider,” *The National Interest Online*, July 1, 2007.

⁸ Diggins, 40-41. Other Diggins’ comparisons of Reagan’s view with Emerson and Paine may be located in the index.

who moved to the right under the impact of Stalinism in the 1930s, the manipulations and flip flops of the American communist party, and the Cold War after 1945. Diggins suggests that Reagan's "miseducation led him to believe that in order to fight communism he had also to fight liberalism," a notion acquired from reading Chambers and hearing too many conservatives denounce the socialistic-communistic tendencies in the New Deal. (112) There is no question that Reagan was an enthusiastic supporter of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal and joined many leftist and communist front groups in Hollywood after his arrival in 1937 through WWII. As biographers of Reagan such as Lou Cannon, Edmund Morris, Jules Tygiel, and others have noted, Reagan turned against Hollywood liberals over battles with communists especially as President of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG). "Ronald Reagan found his vocation in the cause of anticommunism," concludes Diggins, and rode it from the 1940s through his presidency: "It was always on his mind, whether he was performing before the camera, dining out with his wife, negotiating labor contracts and writing letters to friends, or, later, preparing to enter American politics and the world's stage." (83) Yet many liberals, as Diggins notes, made the shift to anticommunism after WWII and did not feel it necessary to abandon 20th century liberalism and the Democratic party. What may have contributed to Reagan's shift is the intense ambition that he always exhibited and the particular mix of opportunities that closed and opened for him. Without very many bumps in the road, Reagan moved fairly quickly from part-time radio announcer of a few college football games to regular sports announcer of Chicago Cubs baseball games, to Hollywood screen actor and President of the Screen Actors Guild. When Reagan's acting career declined after WWII, he blamed this on high tax rates which made it unprofitable in the short run to make very many movies every year and he had to scramble to make a comfortable living. As Garry Wills points out in his early study of Reagan's relationship to American culture and politics, Reagan moved from actor to executive ally of the movie studio heads and Music Corporation of America to eight years working for General Electric on television and also touring the country to visit GE plants and make presentations to civic and other groups on the "mashed potato" circuit. Thomas Evans suggests in his recent book that Reagan probably gained much of his conservative political perspective from this experience.⁹

3) In many respects, Diggins wants to rescue Reagan from conservative myth makers, neoconservatives, and George W. Bush in particular. As indicated in the reviews above, conservatives will not give up Reagan without a showdown at OK Corral. Diggins suggests that Reagan neither carried out a revolution in domestic policy nor developed a coherent national policy. (170-187) The reviewers agree that Diggins has achieved some success on this issue. Sloan, for example, affirms the conclusions of Diggins and his own works on Reagan and the economy that give Reagan as well as Paul Volcker's Federal Reserve credit for ending the stagflation that they inherited from the Carter administration, creating a conservative regime for economic growth with low inflation. Sloan emphasizes how

⁹ See Thomas W. Evans, *The Education of Ronald Reagan: The General Electric Years and the Untold Story of His Conversion to Conservatism* (2007). Long before his national political emergence in his televised speech for Senator Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential campaign, Reagan was a very active guest speaker at conservative groups in California, most notably groups backing Republican Cold War leaders vs. Democrats, opposing civil rights reform, and any cultural and social changes at the grass roots level.

conservatives have obscured the extent to which Reagan had to rely on the government to address economic problems, reversed his initial taxation policies, more than doubled the national debt of the U.S. since its founding, and ended up with an economy that was not as successful overall as that managed by liberal Democrats in the 1960s and President Clinton in the 1990s.¹⁰ “The Bush administration ... has been guided by the Reagan mythology that budget deficits can be ignored, that tax reductions mainly targeted for the benefit of the rich will stimulate the economy, and that economic growth will inevitably solve budget problems,” concludes Sloan. (1-2)

4.) A second contested area is the escalation of the Cold War, or the “Second Cold War,” that Reagan and his advisers launched. Their policies included a significant increase in defense spending, a disinclination to continue arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union, an unofficial “Reagan Doctrine” to not only prevent the spread of communist regimes aligned with Moscow but also to contest and roll back recent apparent Soviet advances in Central America, Angola in Africa, Afghanistan in the Near East, and the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia as well as the Soviet bloc in Poland. Whereas conservative adherents of Reagan and conservative authors have argued that Reagan anticipated winning the Cold War with Moscow, Diggins suggests that Reagan had disagreements with neoconservative advisers from the start but preferred to implement the defense build-up before any negotiations and declined to challenge his advisers directly without having prospects for negotiations with the Kremlin. Secretary of State George Schultz in his memoirs, Beth Fischer and other writers have suggested that without advisers to develop the strategy and clear a path, Reagan found himself hemmed in by his more hard-line advisers. Diggins does not challenge this perspective, noting the degree to which Reagan faced a Cold War orientation that produced more problems than success in the third world from Afghanistan and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism to an unsuccessful intervention in Lebanon, Reagan doctrine based Cold War operations, and U.S. involvement in Central America. Don Critchlow disagrees the most with Diggins with respect to any suggestion that Reagan had a different Cold War perspective than his conservative advisers. Both feared that the Soviet Union had moved ahead of the U.S. in the nuclear arms race, Critchlow suggests, and “there was an expressed fear that a superior nuclear Soviet Union would be able to pressure, even blackmail, the United States in critical areas of foreign policy.” Thus, Reagan and “defense hawks” wanted nuclear superiority to achieve meaningful arms control agreements. “Reagan brought vision to defense policy,” Critchlow concludes, “but he was supported within his administration. Presidents do not and cannot act alone.” (4-5)

5) The most important dimension of Reagan’s record, the ending of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, may be the area that has the highest degree of consensus among historians. Diggins reinforces this consensus by giving considerable credit to both Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev depicting them as indispensable leaders, reinforcing each other, if not always intentionally, and succeeding despite determined opposition from hardliners in the Soviet Politburo, military, KGB, and communist party leadership, and from hardliners in the Reagan administration, the Republican party, and conservative commentators. Diggins’

¹⁰ See John Sloan, “The Economic Costs of Reagan Mythology” in Longley, 41-69.

most significant addition to the issue in Chapter X “From Deterrence to Dialogue: How the Cold War Ended” is his emphasis on Reagan’s increasing priority of getting rid of nuclear weapons as opposed to winning the Cold War or undermining the Soviet Union, the ultimate ambitions of his neoconservative advisers. Diggins suggests that Reagan increasingly paid less attention to them, and relied on the advice and management of Secretary of State George Schultz to achieve his quest. As Reagan responded at the Reykjavik summit in October 1986 to Gorbachev’s repeated concerns about SDI taking the arms race into space and making an American first strike a tempting possibility, “that’s why I proposed to eliminate ballistic missiles and share SDI with you.” Gorbachev replied: “If you will not share oil drilling equipment or even milk processing factories, I do not believe you will share SDI.”; and Reagan responded: “We are willing to eliminate all ballistic missiles before SDI is deployed, so a first strike would be impossible.” (380) Ehrman endorses Diggins’ assessment, noting a number of the nuances in Diggins’ evaluation of Reagan’s contributions as well as Diggins’ perceptive, ironic conclusions on how Reagan’s flawed understanding on the role of the state manifested itself in both the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet regime which did not lead to freedom and democracy just as Reagan’s anti-statist views in the U.S. led to an expansion of the state, increasing corruption and debt, and growing consumer profligacy. (4-5) Reagan “brought the spirit of Tom Paine to Moscow while Washington remained indifferent to his own Emersonian conviction about freedom as self-reliance and the will to change the institutionalized structures of power,” Diggins concludes, “... reflecting on Reagan’s legacy, we are left to ponder a disturbing irony: American ideals did for others what they could not do for us.” (397)

6) In a “Coda” at the end of the book, Diggins compares Reagan with Lincoln and affirms his initial suggestions that Reagan was one of the two or three great presidents after Lincoln. Sloan and Ehrman are not persuaded. In emphasizing the negative impact of Reagan’s views of government as the problem, Sloan stresses the extent to which Reagan relied on Treasury experts to implement his ideas on taxation and the dangers of Reagan’s myths on government and the economy as witnessed in George W. Bush’s efforts to follow Reagan’s myths. (2-3) Ehrman appreciates the comparison of both leaders as men of ideas who struggled for freedom with greatness of soul. However, Ehrman notes several contradictions with Diggins’ earlier writings on Lincoln. Yet Diggins does raise the question of what should be included in the scorecard on presidents as George W. Bush has just left and Barack Obama has arrived. Reagan’s strongest point was his willingness to negotiate with Gorbachev and abandon neoconservative Cold Warriors. His economic program has always been more controversial, and now that the debt issue has regained prominence, despite Republican downplaying of its significance during the Reagan and George Bush administrations, Reagan’s record will have to include his contribution to a consumer culture of living beyond one’s means that Diggins notes, and an undermining of the Republican tradition of maintaining a balanced budget versus those “deficit-spending Democrats.” This could become increasingly important with respect to the United States’ global standing and its ability to achieve its objectives in international relations. Reagan’s second Cold War against communists, Marxists, leftists, and national liberation movements in the Third World also remains a highly contested element of his record.

Participants:

John P. Diggins received his Ph.D. from the University of Southern California and was Distinguished Professor in the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Some of his many influential books on intellectual history included *Up from Communism: Conservative Odysseys in American Intellectual Life* (1971); *Mussolini and Fascism; The View from America* (1972); *The American Left in the Twentieth Century* (1973); *The Bard of Savagery: Thorstein Veblen and Modern Social Theory* (1978); *The Lost Soul of American Politics* (1984), *The Proud Decades: American in War and Peace, 1941-1950* (1988), *Rise and Fall of the American Left* (1992), *The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernity and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority* (1994), *Max Weber: Politics and the Spirit of Tragedy* (1996), editor, *The Liberal, Persuasion: Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and the Challenge of the American Past* (1997); *On Hallowed Ground: Abraham Lincoln and the Foundations of American History* (2000); and *John Adams: The American Presidents Series* (2003) with Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.

Donald T. Critchlow is a Professor of History at St. Louis University. He is the author and editor of a fifteen books including *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism* (2005); *Intended Consequences: Birth Control, Abortion, and the Federal Government* (1999, pap. 2001); *Studebaker: The Life and Death of an American Corporation* (1997); *Brookings Institution: Expertise and the Public Interest in a Democratic Society* (1989); and *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the GOP Right Made Political History* (Harvard University Press, 2007). An anthology on American conspiracy theories, *American Conspiracies Revealed* is in press with Indiana University Press, and he is working on a debate book with Nancy MacLean with Rowman and Little Press, and is well underway on a large study on the history of Hollywood politics.

John Ehrman is an independent historian. He earned a bachelor's degree in history and political science at Tufts University, a master's in international affairs from Columbia University, and his Ph.D. from the George Washington University. He is the author of *The Rise of Neoconservatism* (Yale, 1995), and *The Eighties: America in the Age of Reagan* (Yale, 2005), as well as numerous articles and reviews on modern American conservatism. He is currently researching the history of American liberalism during the 1990s.

John Sloan received his Ph.D in Political Science from the University of Texas in 1968. After teaching several years at Purdue University, he moved to the University of Houston in 1971 and retired in August 2008. His major publications include *FDR and Reagan: Transformative Presidents with Clashing Visions* (University Press of Kansas, 2008); "The Economic Costs of Reagan Mythology," in *Deconstructing Reagan*, edited by Kyle Longley, M.E. Sharpe, 2007); *The Reagan Effect: Economics and Presidential Leadership* (University Press of Kansas, 1999); and *Eisenhower and the Management of Prosperity* (University Press of Kansas, 1991).

John Diggins' *Ronald Reagan: Fate, Freedom, and the Making of History* displays why he is rightfully considered one of the most eminent historians of modern America: this book shows immense erudition and bold imagination. Unlike many historians who write for a larger more popular audience, Diggins tackles larger intellectual questions and presents a more than entertaining narrative.

Diggins places Ronald Reagan within a reform tradition that embraces facile optimism and unlimited human potential. He contrasts Reagan with the Puritans and the framers of the Constitution who maintained that "we must see our errant selves as the problem.... Reagan's thoughts reveal no suggestion of the doctrines of Calvinism and original sin and the ideas of the framers and their sense of evil" (xviii). This is a theme found in many of his recent books. Diggins believes in progress, but warns that those seeking perfection always bring more harm than good.

Diggins was a Marxist in his youth, and like many disillusioned leftists, he rejects political panaceas that ignore human imperfection. In this respect, he falls into the liberal camp of Reinhold Niebuhr. *Reagan* continues this theme and therefore it is of little surprise that Diggins dedicates the book to Raymond Aron, Theodore Draper, François Furet, Sidney Hook, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Diggins often casts himself as a prophet, as much as a detached scholar. The result is compelling jeremiad.

This book is not a comprehensive biography—nor does Diggins pretend that it is—but is a series of chronological, hieratic observations that follow Reagan from youth to his presidency. Readers interested in fuller accounts of the Reagan presidency and the 1980s will turn to Robert Collins, Steven Hayward, John Ehrman, and, of course, Lou Cannon. The power of Diggins' *Reagan* lies in his intellectual imagination, not in serious policy analysis.

Diggins takes Reagan seriously as a conscious historical actor and a president who changed the course of history. He credits Reagan with ending the arms race with the Soviet Union and reducing the threat of nuclear war. Diggins correctly dismisses the superficial and highly politicized portraits of Reagan found in Garry Wills, *Reagan's America: Innocents at Home* (1987), Haynes Johnson, *Sleep Walking Through History: American in the Reagan Years* (1992), and Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan: The Movie* (1988). Diggins acerbically notes "Reagan, a victim of violence, knew the world was more real than any cinematic representation. He was also aware of his reputation as a warmonger, a shoot-first gunslinger, a tool of the imperialist and the "running dogs of capitalism" (198-199).

Reagan, as seen by Diggins, was a romantic in foreign policy surrounded by a staff of advisers who were realists. "He sought peace and helped bring an end to the cold war," Diggins writes, "without resorting to violence against America's major antagonist" (194). With this accomplishment, Reagan proved the philosophers—Thucydides, Hobbes, Hegel, and Marx—wrong in their belief that war was inevitable. Reagan came into the White House convinced that if he could develop a personal relationship with the leadership of the

Soviet Union, the arms race between the two countries could be avoided. While recovering in the hospital from the assassination attempt, Reagan wrote to the general chairman of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Leonid Brezhnev, in an attempt to get to the bottom of the dangerous distrust between the United States and the USSR. When Reagan's Soviet advisers, such as Richard Pipes learned of the letter, they anxiously rewrote it. After the heavily revised letter was returned to him, Reagan replied "This is not what I had written, but they are the experts." Presidential adviser Michael K. Deaver blurted out, "You know, Mr. President, those assholes have been running the Soviet business for the last forty years, and they haven't done a very good job of it. None of them ever got elected to anything; you got elected. Why don't you just tell them to stick it and send the goddam letter" (191). Brezhnev sent a frosty reply to Reagan, but when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985, Reagan's efforts to bring rapprochement bore fruit.

While providing a rich revisionist account, Diggins remains highly critical of Ronald Reagan. At the core of Diggins' critique is a portrait of Reagan as an Emersonian. In Diggins' depiction, Reagan captured an "Emersonian moment" in American history, the decade of the 1980s, when "people were told to trust not the state but the self and to pursue wealth and power without sin or shame. Far from being a conservative, Reagan was the great liberating spirit of modern American history, a political romantic impatient with the status quo" (xvii.). Diggins asserts that Reagan offered three of the most radical thoughts ever held by an American president: We have no history; "the people know no evil because our God-given desires are good, and only the state knows how to sin" (14). Thus, for Diggins, Reagan is an Emersonian liberal who saw himself as "the lifeguard of American liberalism, rescuing it from drowning in the raging currents of radicalism that inundated three generations of twentieth-century history" (1).

Diggins accuses Reagan of encouraging the American people to pursue their unlimited desires, including making demands upon government. The ironical result would be "big government" conservatism. Thus, Reagan became a "political leader who told America that he had extirpated liberalism," but in "in reality exacerbated it. . . .Like the poet [Emerson], "the president left the American mind innocent without knowledge of power and evil and the sins of human nature" (51). The Reagan of Diggins is a philosophical idealist who believed that ideas could move mountains, but did not fully understand the caution of the Founding Fathers who warned of passionate self-interest as corrosive to republican values. What other conclusion could be reached in a jeremiad against this so-called "Emersonian moment"?

Yet, how do we know that Reagan was an Emersonian? Diggins quotes Reagan once as quoting Emerson, but he does not show Emerson as having had any direct intellectual influence on Reagan. Diggins' case is circumstantial: Emerson rejected original sin, promoted self-interest, projected unrestrained optimism, and accepted American exceptionalism. So did Reagan, as Diggins tells us. This is specious intellectual history. No doubt, Reagan expressed similar sentiments as did Emerson, but in the end it's difficult to see Reagan going into the woods to commune with Nature and correspond with the Divine Over-soul. And, how is it that Reagan is both a Lockean and an Emersonian? And, how is it

that Reagan was an Emersonian when he called for small government, while Emerson insisted on activist government?

But, even to ask such questions proves misleading. We can debate whether Reagan was a true conservative when he insisted on balanced government, a restoration of federalism, lower taxes, a strong national defense, a fear of centralized government, and promotion of individual rights, but what are the implications of such a debate? Where does it lead us to declare that Reagan was really an Emersonian? Diggins presumes that America would have been better off if Reagan had told Americans to be more tempered in their expectations of individual success; that humans are imperfect and by nature sinful; and that optimism is best tempered by an understanding of original sin and human weakness. Yet, is not this exactly what Carter suggested in his famous “malaise speech,” and did it not help to cost him reelection? Does Diggins seriously believe that if Reagan had offered such warnings to the American people that “big government” conservatism would not have developed?

The irony here is that Diggins is an idealist himself. He thinks ideas can move mountains. At some point, however, good history needs to account for the actualities of political structures, material conditions, and economic forces. There is little of this in Diggins’ book, as engaging as he is an historian.

Diggins views Reagan as standing outside mainstream conservatism. This is a counter-intuitive argument that probably would not persuade many on the right or left. Conservatives called for a ‘strong national defense’. Since the outset of the Cold War, conservatives maintained that a policy of “Peace through strength” was the best way to protect the nation from nuclear war. Military weakness invited attack from foreign enemies. Reagan’s presidency gave highest priority to strengthening the nation’s military preparedness, after nearly a decade of severe budget cuts by a Democratic controlled Congress in the 1970s. Reagan’s policies paid dividends. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Soviet Union and the United States signed arms control treaties that radically cut entire nuclear weapons and delivery systems for the first time in history.

Conservatives such as Reagan did not seek to create a perfect world, rather, they believed this was impossible. Indeed, history showed that those who sought to create a “perfect world”—whether it be the French revolutionaries after 1789, the Russian Bolsheviks after 1917, or Nazis in the 1930s—created only chaos and destruction.

In general, conservatives such as Reagan emphasize the *wisdom of history* and reject radical social change as foolish, faddish, or based upon willful arrogance. Conservatives believe in evolution (at least for the body politic, if not for the species) rather than radical change or revolution, in caution over hastiness (knowing that activist government to solve problems is often folly); in individual rights rather than collective group rights; in liberty as a virtue necessary to provide liberty and equality, whereas a surplus of equality will so diminish liberty that there will be a tyranny of equality. Drawing from English philosopher John Locke, conservatives maintain that private property is the foundation of liberty and a necessity to prevent the tyranny of an all powerful state. As such conservatives are

suspicious of state power, except when it was exercised in the necessary external defense of the nation. Conservatives respect history, its lessons, and numerous follies.

It was within this philosophical framework that conservatives such as Ronald Reagan sought new policies and a new politics as an alternative to the New Deal-Great Society welfare and regulatory state.

If Diggins miscasts Reagan and the conservative tradition in America, his account of the neo-conservatives in the administration will also draw criticism. Diggins contrasts the romanticism of Reagan with the realism of the neo-conservatives. He does not describe who these neo-conservatives were in the Reagan administration, but he mentions Daniel Pipes, Richard Perle, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, and Secretary of State Alexander Haig. (It is not clear if Diggins wanted to include the latter two among the neo-conservatives.) Whatever the case, he suggests that neo-conservatism was a coherent, uniform movement. Actually, neo-conservatives were not of one mind about politics or political ideology. They were a diverse lot, coming from a varied intellectual and religious background. Diggins finds the roots of neo-conservatism in a Trotskyist tradition, but to be accurate Irving Kristol, one of the god fathers of neo-conservatism, was a Lovestonite; aside from this quibble, Norman Podhoretz was never a Trotskyite or a Communist of any kind. Daniel Pipes had been a long time hawk on defense issues well before the rise of the neo-conservatism, and Richard Perle was a protégé of Senator Henry Jackson and Paul Nitze. Moreover, contrary to Diggins' assertion that "neocons were less concerned about spooks within the country than specters without" (209), Irving Kristol as editor of the *New Statesman* had defended HUAC in the 1950s and reproached liberals for ignoring the threats of Communist subversion at home.

What the hawks in the Reagan administration shared was a belief that the Soviet Union had not lived up to SALT I and was outdistancing American in the nuclear arms race. These fears hardened into opposition to the ratification of SALT II in the Carter administration. There is considerable evidence for these concerns about Soviet nuclear escalation in the 1970s. There was an expressed fear that a superior nuclear Soviet Union would be able to pressure, even blackmail, the United States in critical areas of foreign policy.

In addition, hawks within the Reagan administration questioned the Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) strategy employed in the Kennedy-Johnson administrations and continued in the Nixon administration. MAD was premised on second-strike capacity, but Reagan defense hawks believed correctly that the Soviet Union was pursuing a first strike strategy that undermined United States' nuclear strategy. An effective MAD strategy assumed reciprocity on both sides. As a result, defense hawks in the Reagan administration sought nuclear superiority for the United States, and once nuclear superiority was obtained, real arms control agreements could be reached with the Soviet Union. Reagan brought vision to defense policy, but he was supported within his administration. Presidents do not and cannot act alone.

Diggins offers an engaging, and sometimes flawed understanding, of Reagan. Yet, this book is worth reading, both as history and prophecy, especially in this time of financial crisis and

a post-Cold War order of rogue nations, the politics of oil, humanitarian interventions, and new debates over national security.

For more than three decades, John Patrick Diggins has been one of the nation's leading intellectual and political historians. His books have looked at the intellectual roots of the modern conservative movement (*Up From Communism* [1976]), examined the travails of the twentieth-century American left (*The Rise and Fall of the American Left* [1992]), interpreted American political thought (*The Lost Soul of American Politics* [1984]), and covered current historiographical and intellectual controversies (*On Hallowed Ground* [2000]). In these works, as well as in his many articles and reviews, Diggins has been consistently insightful and provocative, and always willing to challenge prevailing orthodoxies about American political culture. Thus, a book by Diggins on Ronald Reagan is something to look forward to—Reagan, as Sean Wilentz recently observed, remains badly neglected by historians, and Diggins has an arsenal of intellectual tools and experience that he can use to help advance our understanding of the fortieth president.

At first glance, *Ronald Reagan* appears to be like many other books on Reagan, his presidency, and the start of the era of conservative rule. In the first third of the book, Diggins looks at Reagan's core beliefs and their roots, situates them in American intellectual history, and then marches through Reagan's early life, his acting career, and two terms as governor of California. Almost all of the rest of the book is taken up by the events of Reagan's presidency, both at home and abroad, with a brief evaluation at the end of Reagan's place in history. Looked at quickly, then, *Ronald Reagan* is much like previous narratives of the Reagan presidency by Lou Cannon, William Pemberton, Richard Reeves, and others, covering familiar ground and addressing many of the same events and issues.

Such a superficial reading of *Ronald Reagan*, however, would miss the points that set this ambitious book apart. Rather than write just another narrative of Reagan's political life, Diggins seeks to overturn much of the conventional thinking about Reagan, which usually portrays him as a product of the post-1945 conservative rebellion against the established liberal order. Diggins instead wants to demonstrate that Reagan was not a rebel but, rather, was truly representative of the main currents of American political culture.

This is not a conclusion that Diggins reached suddenly, for it is rooted in his writings of the past three decades. During this time, Diggins often has drawn on the central point made by the consensus historians of the 1940s and 1950s, especially as it was articulated by Louis Hartz in his classic book, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955), that American political culture rests on John Locke and his emphasis on the individual's right to property and the fruits of his labor. Diggins made it clear as early as 1975 that he believed Hartz's point that American society has an "absolute and irrational attachment" to Locke, while challenged, has never been refuted and, as he wrote in 2000, the United States still has a "rights-based political culture in which claims to opportunity... are derived from Lockean liberalism."¹

¹ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955; reprint, New York: HBJ, 1991), 6; John Patrick Diggins, *Up From Communism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 340-41; Diggins, *On Hallowed Ground* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 17.

Ironically, Diggins originally used Locke to show the political limits of modern American conservatism. Citing Hartz, Diggins wrote in *Up From Communism* that the Lockean impulse drives Americans into an “obsessive individualism” that was contrary to conservatism because it undermined the conservative values of “moral individualism” and the legitimacy of authority. Postwar conservatism, Diggins argued, could not escape from this contradiction. In their intellectual defense of capitalism and individualism, Diggins concluded, conservatives wound up as advocates for a social order that in practice they found offensive. (Eventually, the intellectual right worked its way out of the contradiction by embracing supply-side economics and its promise of prosperity through innovation, jettisoning any commitment to Burkean ideals of tradition and authority, and defining the result as conservatism. It was this conservatism to which Diggins was referring in 1988 when he pointed out that those on the right who wanted to restrain the roles of the federal government and roll back modern liberalism could cite Locke and thereby ground their arguments in Americans’ conceptions of themselves. Conservatives did not escape Locke, therefore, but instead put him to use for their own ends.²)

Diggins is correct when he points out in *Ronald Reagan* that Reagan himself was central to the success of this transformation. Reagan, Diggins reminds us, “had no trouble whatsoever” with the idea that prosperity might lead to the “excessive pursuit of material pleasure.” He was happy to encourage work and the accumulation and enjoyment of wealth, while leaving the people “free to act on their own without external restraints.” (17) Students of Reagan’s life and career have long understood this and also know that Reagan’s choice of free-market conservatism over that of Burke was not the result of philosophical reflection so much as of personal experience. Reagan had grown up in a small town where, for all his later talk of a Huck Finn childhood, his family had lived on the edge of poverty. Once he graduated from college, Reagan left rural Illinois as fast as he could and worked hard to achieve stardom and wealth. Even when his career stumbled in the late 1940s and early 1950s, he never showed any sign of wanting to leave California and return to his roots.

Diggins is too careful a historian to rest his analysis of Reagan solely on the Lockean argument, and so he develops a second point to support his argument that Reagan was the inheritor of the American political tradition. This is his claim that Reagan was an Emersonian, “not only in temperament but sometimes even in thought.” (37) According to Diggins, when Reagan spoke on the central themes of his presidency—America’s limitless possibilities, the need to remove the restraints that held back its people, and his celebration of American heroes—he was preaching Emerson., Diggins bolsters this argument with an analysis of Reagan’s religious outlook. Consistent with his Emersonian view, says Diggins, Reagan constructed a theology that celebrated the fulfillment of desire and had no room for guilt or the idea that the people might be flawed. Reagan wanted to “drive America into the promised land without going through the valley of woe,” writes Diggins. “Reagan relieved

² Diggins, *Up From Communism*, pp. 389, 443-45, 453, 455; Diggins, “Louis Hartz’s Quarrel with American History,” *Political Theory* 16 (August 1998): 359.

America of the thought of sin and suffering and enabled the people to see God as an idealized conception of their own goodness.” (45) Thus, for Diggins, Reagan was not only the eternal optimist, but also a romantic who believed that government had to be the cause of all problems, because the American people were innocents, “without knowledge of power and evil and the sins of human nature.” (51)

These are points that no previous writer has made about Reagan, and they may turn out to be crucial to Reagan historiography and the changing evaluations of his presidency. Reagan’s critics, like Garry Wills, have long argued that he sold his policies with rhetoric that was based on myths and wishful thinking about the country’s past. These critiques, however, assumed that Reagan was a simplistic thinker and therefore Wills and others did not look to see if any sophisticated ideas lay beneath his views. Indeed, until now political scientist Hugh Heclo has been alone in pointing out that Reagan’s political philosophy was rooted in early American thinking, especially the sacramental vision of the Puritans. With Diggins now building on Heclo—and other authors, such as Thomas Evans, who has shown that Reagan drew on a variety of modern ideas as well—Reagan’s critics will be forced to contend with a growing body of evidence that his ideology drew on many strands of the American experience.³

Diggins presents these arguments in the first fifty pages of *Ronald Reagan*, and that is the strongest part of the book. Diggins is clearly engaged by his examination of Reagan’s intellectual heritage, and his vigorous writing reflects the originality of his argument. Once past these points, Diggins is still interested—and interesting—as he chronicles the battles between liberals and communists in postwar Hollywood, Reagan’s part in the struggles, and then Reagan’s conversion to conservatism. But as he moves away from the world of ideas and ideological conflict and into Reagan’s political career, the book loses steam. Diggins presents a solid account of Reagan’s years as governor and president, but this is well-worked ground and Diggins makes unfortunate errors as he retells the familiar tales and anecdotes. Nine times in two pages, for example, he refers to Reagan’s budget director, David Stockman, as “Stockton,” and at another point elevates Jimmy Carter’s national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, to secretary of state. (180-81, 253)

Diggins’s decision to cover the entirety of the Reagan years is also unfortunate because it forces him to scatter his best points, which are about the clash between Reagan’s Emersonian views and American politics’ Lockean culture, throughout the narrative rather than focus them in once place. Taking these points as a whole, Diggins gives an interesting perspective on Reagan’s failure to cut the size of the federal government by explaining that his Emersonian beliefs could not overcome the American peoples’ insistence that their government continue to provide them with benefits. Reagan could not achieve his goals, Diggins concludes, because “Washington remained indifferent to his own Emersonian

³ Hugh Heclo, “Ronald Reagan and the American Public Philosophy,” in W. Elliot Brownlee and Hugh Davis Graham, eds., *The Reagan Presidency* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003). For Reagan as a mythmaker, see Garry Wills, *Reagan’s America* (New York: Doubleday, 1987). For Reagan’s adoption of more modern ideas, see Thomas Evans, *The Education of Ronald Reagan*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

conviction about freedom as self-reliance and the will to change the institutionalized structures of power.” (397)

Diggins also uses this analysis to look at the ethical failures of the Reagan years, noting that Reagan’s free-market policies brought prosperity, but at the price of numerous scandals. In describing the savings and loan collapse and other financial scandals, Diggins writes that “while Reagan opened the American mind to the material blessings of freedom, however, he allowed it to stay closed to the requirements of moral authority.” (341) Because Reagan’s Emersonian belief that the people could be relied upon to be virtuous was no match for the temptations of deregulated capitalism, he sees this aspect of Reagan’s ideology, too, as ultimately a failure. “What would Emerson say?” Diggins asks, as he points out that Reagan-era conservatives invoked the need for free markets as a way to excuse just about any financial misbehavior. (409-10) Indeed, this is the outcome that Diggins foresaw in *Up From Communism*.

The book makes a strong recovery at the end, however, as Diggins covers Reagan’s shift in policy toward the Soviet Union during his second term. Again, the story of how Reagan, motivated by a sincere horror at the prospect of nuclear war broke with his advisers and forged a strong relationship with the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, is familiar to readers of Reagan histories. But Diggins tells it from a fresh perspective, emphasizing Reagan’s independence as a thinker who “ceased listening to his advisers and started listening to himself.” (218) In Diggins’s telling, Reagan understood that cold war tensions were the result of failures of reason and trust, and he believed that these could be overcome by leaders with faith in their own people—again, the Emersonian reading of Reagan. Once he had a Soviet counterpart who “was trying to break away from doctrinaire communism,” Reagan “broke free of the rigidities of cold war thinking” and built a partnership with Gorbachev to work toward disarmament. (393) Diggins believes that the Soviet Union collapsed because of its internal weaknesses and thus does not give Reagan too much credit for that, but nonetheless credits his work with Gorbachev for creating the atmosphere in which the cold war could end and communism then pass away peacefully. When Reagan went to Moscow in 1988 and addressed a rapturous university audience, Diggins points out, his words were grounded in Emerson—“follow your dream or stick to your conscience, even if you’re the only one in a sea of doubters.” By bringing this message into the heart of the Soviet Union, Diggins concludes, “Reagan helped Russia liberate itself.” (391)

Even though Diggins may be a little too enthusiastic in crediting Reagan for Russia’s escape from communism, this part of the book works very well. In contrast to Reagan’s ideological problems at home, Diggins builds a good case for the power of his ideas in international politics and the possibilities for strong leaders to accomplish the unexpected. Diggins also takes the opportunity to pose some awkward questions about the nature of democratic states and conservative assumptions. Even though Reagan helped liberate Russia, says Diggins, the end of the oppressive Soviet regime did not bring freedom and democracy because the successor state was too weak to build new institutions; in the United States, Reagan’s belief that government should not restrain the desires of the people led to an expansion of the state, a breakdown in public morality, and growing corruption. For

Diggins, the lesson is clear: conservatism based on Burke and his warning of the need for authority and restraint is superior to libertarian-free market conservatism that weakens the state and gives free rein to popular appetites. Indeed, as he compares Reagan's achievement in the cold war with his record at home, Diggins takes a tragic view of the results. "Reflecting on Reagan's legacy, we are left to ponder a disturbing irony: American ideals did for others what they could not do for us." (397)

His book may be finished, but Diggins has one more point to make. In a 13-page coda, he compares Reagan and Abraham Lincoln, and argues that Reagan should be considered Lincoln's equal in greatness. Both, says Diggins, were men of ideas, and in battling slavery and communism each struggled for freedom. Diggins points out that Lincoln was a tragic hero who saw himself at the mercy of events; Reagan's Emersonian outlook robbed him of any tragic vision, but his heroism "consisted in defying destiny and taking control of events." Diggins acknowledges that Reagan was more fortunate than Lincoln, in that he did not have to go to war but, like Lincoln, afterward sought to be generous to the loser. "Both exceptional presidents were politically wise, human, and magnanimous," he concludes. "Each had greatness of soul." (430)

This is a big argument to pack into such a small space and Diggins does not quite pull it off. It is a hard argument to make in the first place--for all his skills as a communicator, which of Reagan's speeches compare to Lincoln's at Cooper Union, Gettysburg, or the Second Inaugural as timeless statements of political philosophy? It is also curious that Diggins, with his emphasis on Hartz, seems to overlook Hartz's point that it was Lincoln who, by defeating the Southern challenge to American liberalism, made possible the triumph of the "theory of democratic capitalism implicit from the outset in the American" reliance on Locke. This, of course, is the same Lockean capitalism that led to the corruption of the Reagan years, which so distresses Diggins. Another problem with the comparison is rooted in Diggins's own writings about Lincoln, whose place in American history he has been considering for more than twenty years. In *The Lost Soul of American Politics*, Diggins stressed Lincoln's spiritual conscience. "Lincoln asked Americans to feel within themselves the dilemma of sinful man who cannot do right and cannot admit wrong." Diggins expanded on this in 2000, when he wrote that Lincoln provided a "vision" of what America should be—"in [Lincoln's] patriotic nationalism, in his liberal dedication to work and opportunity for all, and in his religious devotion to justice, charity, and magnanimity, American history reached its most sublime synthesis." Having already made it clear that Reagan was free from guilt and incapable of seeing the American people as sinful, it is odd to see Diggins stake Reagan's claim to greatness in such spiritual terms. As much as the two presidents might have accomplished as politicians and statesmen, for Diggins to elevate Reagan to Lincoln's level depends either on not considering the Locke-Emerson conflict or on dropping the discussion of much of what Diggins until now believed made Lincoln the greatest of presidents.⁴

⁴ Hartz, *Liberal Tradition*, p. 199; John Patrick Diggins, *The Lost Soul of American Politics* (New York: Basic, 1984; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 331; Diggins, *On Hallowed Ground*, 40.

Perhaps Diggins tried to do too much in *Ronald Reagan*. It is, to be sure, a fine book with many interesting and original points. But *Ronald Reagan*'s best parts—the early discussion of Reagan's intellectual heritage, the points about Emerson being inadequate to hold back moral decay, and Reagan's role in ending the cold war—each might have stood well as discrete essays. Similarly, an expansion of the coda on Lincoln would have enabled Diggins to flesh out his argument and consider it more fully than its current length allows. In sum, a shorter book focusing on Diggins's unique views of Reagan and dropping what has been written before might have elevated *Ronald Reagan* to the level of an extraordinary book.

The first evaluations of the Ronald Reagan presidency by liberal scholars were generally negative. Reagan was usually portrayed as an “amiable dunce,” an uninformed ex-actor with simplistic ideas, whose political success could be explained by the manipulative skills of his public relations staff and by luck. However, the rejuvenated American economy in the 1980s and the collapse of Communism in the early 1990s have forced many scholars to revise their initial judgment of Reagan’s leadership. John Patrick Diggins, Professor of History at the City University of New York Graduate Center, has provided students of the American Presidency with a provocative thesis. The author argues that Reagan is one of the three great liberators in American history. Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves; Franklin Roosevelt defeated fascism; and Reagan won the Cold War utilizing peaceful means.

Diggins is mainly interested in “the genesis of policy positions, where the ideas came from” that influenced Reagan’s presidency. (xvi) He argues that a major source of Reagan’s politics was the philosophy of the nineteenth century liberal, Ralph Waldo Emerson. As Diggins sees it, Reagan reflects Emerson’s optimism, his philosophical stance that America does not grow old, but circumvents the negative fate of other nations because of its commitment to individual freedom, which provides the energy for perpetual renewal. And Reagan’s personal ideology perpetuates Emerson’s faith that America was selected as the new promised land by God to fulfill His divine plan. According to Diggins, “With the 1980s came America’s ‘Emersonian moment,’ when people were told to trust not the state but the self and to pursue wealth and power without sin or shame. Far from being a conservative, Reagan was the great liberating spirit of modern American history, a political romantic impatient with the status quo.” (xvii)

Few conservatives are likely to agree with Diggins’ argument that their hero, who led them from the wilderness of Goldwater’s defeat in 1964 to the landslide victories in 1980 and 1984, was really a liberal. And yet it must be conceded that Reagan was less likely to cite Edmund Burke’s conservative ideas about history, precedent, and order and more likely to repeat Thomas Paine’s radical notion that the United States had the opportunity to change the world.

In evaluating the Reagan administration, Diggins is concerned with refuting several myths that have been propagated by conservatives. For example, one myth claims that Reagan’s policies solved the problems his administration inherited from the liberal regime that had governed since FDR’s New Deal, and, thereby “remade” America. (xxi) It is true that, with the help of Paul Volcker’s Federal Reserve, the Reagan presidency was able to rescue the economy from the quagmire of stagflation that had sunk the Carter administration. But the economic record of the Reagan years was no better than the records of Kennedy and Johnson during the 1960s and Clinton during the 1990s. Moreover, the success of Volcker’s monetary policy causes some problems for Reagan’s ideological supporters. First, Volcker was originally appointed chairman of the Federal Reserve in 1979 by President Carter, the personification of failed liberalism. Second, Volcker’s monetary policy, which was largely

followed by his successor Alan Greenspan in 1987, was a national policy, formulated by a centralized political institution, that successfully muzzled inflation. The Volcker-Greenspan success story weakens the conservative dogma that discretionary government policies cannot improve market outcomes. And, finally, the record indicates that Volcker did more of the “heavy lifting” in fighting inflation than Reagan did. While the President cut taxes and ran budget deficits, Volcker bore the political heat of keeping interest rates high.

Ironically, after the ineptness of the Carter presidency, Reagan’s economic policies restored confidence in government, but they did not reduce its size nor compel it to function within the discipline of a balanced budget. In the 1980 campaign, Reagan promised to balance the budget by 1984, but, during his presidency, the national debt increased from \$914 billion to \$2.6 trillion. The total national debt accumulated under the nation’s first thirty-nine presidents more than doubled under its fortieth. When Reagan was inaugurated, it cost the U.S. \$71 billion a year to service the national debt; when he left office, the debt service had soared to over \$150 billion annually. Diggins concludes that, “big government remained the bugaboo of [Reagan’s] lifetime even as he did as much as any president to make it bigger. Under Reagan, the original sin of liberalism and the Democratic Party, a gargantuan government and a huge national debt, became the perpetual curse of conservatism and the Republican Party.” (xx)

There is a paradox in Diggins’ belated respect for the leadership of Ronald Reagan. Just as the author is discovering how effective many of Reagan’s ideas were during the 1980s, those ideas now appear to be inadequate when used by President George W. Bush to combat the problems of the new century. Lowering tax rates may have been an effective strategy to promote economic growth in 1981 when the top rate was 70 percent, but it proved to be a less productive strategy in 2001, when the top rate was 39 percent.

The Bush administration, influenced by senior political adviser, Karl Rove, has been guided by the Reagan mythology that budget deficits can be ignored, that tax reductions mainly targeted for the benefit of the rich will stimulate the economy, and that economic growth will inevitably solve budget problems. Conveniently forgotten are the three tax increases that Reagan signed in order to lower the soaring budget deficits caused by the overly generous tax cuts enacted in 1981. The result of Bush’s reliance on the Reagan myth has been a negative transformation in the fiscal situation from small budget surpluses during the last three years of the Clinton presidency (obviously constrained by a Republican-controlled Congress after 1994) to expanding budget deficits since Bush took office, including a record high deficit of \$413 billion in fiscal year 2004. After the congressional elections in November 2002, Bush’s Treasury Secretary, Paul O’Neill, warned at a budget meeting that the federal government was approaching a fiscal crisis; he was abruptly interrupted by Vice President Dick Cheney, who retorted, “Reagan proved deficits don’t matter.”

For conservatives, the mythology of Reaganomics defanged the fear of deficits and freed them from the responsibility of weighing the costs of diminished revenue in proposing tax cuts. Hence, conservative Republicans are as prone to fling tax breaks at problems as liberal Democrats were to throw money at social problems in the 1960s. With Reagan’s

mythology casting its delusional spell over both the Bush administration and most of the Republicans in Congress, the ability of the political system to deal honestly with budget issues in the foreseeable future appears slight.

In claiming that Reagan was one of our greatest presidents and comparing him to Abraham Lincoln, Diggins ought to examine whether our fortieth president induced us to follow the better angels of our nature. Although most conservatives will disagree, I don't believe Reagan passes the Lincoln test. Reagan's simple idea that government is the problem inhibits analyzing those times when government is the solution, or is part of the solution. Reagan myths make a virtue out of a vice, namely, avoiding expert advice. Bureaucratic expertise in the Treasury Department helped him achieve economic and political success with the Tax Reform Act of 1986. Reagan myths amplify the always present danger that a president operating in the politicized, comfortable cocoon of the White House can be shielded from unpleasant truths. For example, neither Reagan's nor George W. Bush's tax cuts have increased the United States' low propensity to save and *have* widened income and wealth disparities.

The economic cost of Reagan mythology is high because it encourages conservative policymakers to believe in ideologically-deduced fantasies rather than what is feasible based on empirically-derived probabilities. Trust in miracles provides perverse incentives for politicians to avoid confronting painful issues like budget and trade deficits, global warming, and the future funding of Social Security and Medicare. Operating under Reagan's shadow, rigid and delusional behavior is defined as moral, and attempts to forge compromises are considered immoral. Reagan's legacy inspires conservatives to champion ideologically-based initiatives to condemn both reality-based thinking and pragmatic adjustments. When there is conflict between Reagan's truths and mathematical or scientific evidence, conservatives argue that policymakers should continue Reagan's course and disregard the latter. That is not a formula for a successful political system.

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